Breaking the Mold Without Breaking the Bank

A Guide to Transforming the Teaching Job

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Students deserve teachers who thrive in dynamic, rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable jobs. But in an era of unparalleled innovation and workplace transformation, the role of an American teacher remains isolating, rigidly structured, and—for too many educators—unsustainable. This stagnation is bad for both educators and students, especially in our highest-need schools, where persistent teacher turnover undermines efforts to diversify the workforce, build strong school cultures, and provide enriching, empowering instruction.

Reimagining the teaching job requires us to challenge core assumptions about how we organize people, time, and money in American public schools. To make the teaching job more attractive and sustainable, leaders need to facilitate a shift from a siloed, one-size-fits-all model of teaching to a collaborative approach centered on expert-led educator teams that share the work of planning, teaching, and supporting students. In this model, teachers benefit from sustainable workloads, meaningful leadership opportunities, and competitive compensation, allowing them to move through a dynamic career path where roles and supports vary over time.

The idea of improving the teaching job isn't new. But the standard approach—creating narrow pilot programs in small numbers of schools that work around, rather than alter, system-level policies and practices—rarely creates lasting improvement. To catalyze and sustain change, we must redesign the underlying economic structures of the teaching job with new staffing plans, redistributed schedules, competitive compensation models, and adjusted conceptions of what counts as "learning time."

These materials outline actions that build toward longer-term transformation, rather than short-term solutions. We show what this transformational change might look like in the context of five different "catalytic entry points," or starting points for holistically redesigning educator roles. Our goal is to demonstrate how leaders can fundamentally restructure teaching roles to improve educators' and students' day-to-day experiences—without spending money and resources on actions that offer only short-term benefits.

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Understanding the Economics of the Teaching Job

Five factors shape the total cost and structure of the teaching job:

- Class and group sizes.
- Schedule designs.
- Where, when, and how learning happens.
- Teaming structures and educator assignments.
- Compensation models.

The traditional, default way leaders think about these levers—which is often based on rigid teaching roles and limited organizational models—has put educators in a box that makes change expensive, difficult to implement, and unsustainable. While they're recognizable by anyone who has visited, learned, or taught in an American public school, these common "in-the-box" structures are based on outdated principles about what conditions help students learn and teachers thrive. They offer stability but constrain innovation.

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In contrast, research-based, "out-of-the-box" structures enable creativity and open the door for leaders at all levels to forge more dynamic and invigorating experiences for students and a more attractive and sustainable teaching job.

	In-the-Box Levers That Constrain Sustainable Innovation	Out-of-the-Box Levers That Enable Sustainable Innovation
Class and Group Sizes	Uniform class sizes and teaching loads.	Teaching roles and class/group sizes organized to meet student and educator needs.
Schedule Design	Limited, rigid time for instruction and planning.	Expanded, flexible schedules that include sufficient time for team planning and adjust for student learning needs.
Where, When, and How Learning Happens	Teacher-led classroom instruction.	Expanded learning experiences that include curated out-of-school and online opportunities.
Teaming Structures and Educator Assignments	Staffing levels automatically set to maintain a siloed instructional model.	Instructional responsibilities shared among expert-led teams of educators with differentiated roles.
Compensation Models	Lockstep pay schedules driven by teaching experience and earned credits.	Competitive compensation aligned to roles and responsibilities that evolve over teachers' careers.

Individually, each in-the-box lever limits leaders' abilities to reimagine the teaching job. Taken together, these legacy features can stymie districtwide innovation efforts and make lasting change prohibitively expensive to sustain.

Consider a traditional public high school, for example, with classes of 25 to 30 students. The school's schedule consists of periods of fixed length, each facilitated by a single teacher. Staffing levels are set based on a target student-teacher ratio for a one-teacher, one-classroom model. Within this structure, a core subject teacher might teach six 45-minute periods per day to a total of 150 students or more, with one or two periods per day for planning, collaboration, coaching, or growth-oriented observation.

This type of fixed, classroom-based learning structure limits opportunities for both students and teachers: Students only have access to courses that traditional teachers are equipped to lead, and because teaching roles are all designed to be the same, the compensation model treats each teacher with similar experience and postgraduate education the same. This model ignores the teaching loads, challenges, and responsibilities that vary widely across courses or schools.

In-the-Box Structures

Most changes made within in-the-box models don't fundamentally change students' and educators' day-to-day experiences and are also expensive to implement. Because school districts vary widely in enrollment and revenue, we size in-the-box and out-of-the-box strategies as a percentage of a typical district's annual operating budget. Most in-the-box solutions require substantial investments from the district budget.

A Sense of Scale

While a 1% increase in a typical district's budget might sound small, it could actually fund the addition of one teacher in every school or an extra week of summer planning time for all teachers. A 1% decrease in a district's budget, on the other hand, could lead to reducing central office staff by 15%.

- Reducing **class sizes** can be politically appealing, but within a one-teacher, one-classroom model, it requires hiring more teaching staff. A district that reduces all class sizes by three students, for example, typically needs to increase their annual budget by **4.1%** for additional teacher salaries; a focus on all elementary schools would cost **2.5%** of annual expenditures.[1]
- **Schedule designs** that include sufficient time for teachers to learn or plan together typically add to—rather than shift—teachers' responsibilities. A school team might increase collaboration time during the school day, for example, or add professional development days to the calendar. These shifts can also be costly: Moving from 45 to 90 minutes of collaboration time per week would cost the average district **2%** of its annual budget. Adding five days of professional development would increase the budget by **1%**.

[1] All cost estimates are shown as a percentage of a typical school district's annual operating budget. Estimates are based on a sample of 25 districts from ERS' national comparison database.

- In **teacher-led instructional models**, leaders need to hire more teachers to expand and diversify course offerings during the traditional school day—assuming the district can find qualified teachers to fill these roles. This additive model doesn't expose students to community- and work-based learning opportunities that could further broaden their horizons.
- Traditional structures of 20 to 30 students and one teacher in a single classroom typically limit changes to **teaming structures and educator assignments**. In these default contexts, teachers have little opportunity to team teach, collaboratively review student work, or adapt lesson plans. Rigid teacher assignments also restrict time spent on addressing individual student needs and small-group instruction. In addition to being expensive, adding staff tends to layer more resources onto existing problems without enabling educators to provide integrated, coordinated supports across a grade level or subject area.
- In today's rigid system, most leaders approach **teacher compensation** by increasing pay across the board. A **5%** raise for all teachers, however, translates to a **2%** increase in district budget. When including non-teaching staff, this recurring annual cost can double.

Out-of-the-Box Structures

In contrast to the rigid default model, out-of-the-box approaches are grounded in research-based strategies that help make teaching more sustainable and engaging; enrich student experiences and improve student outcomes; and unwind legacy cost structures. Rather than positioning each cost lever as a siloed, distinct strategy, leaders who adopt an out-of-the-box approach consider how each lever informs and connects to the others, which allows for more cohesive decision-making.

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- A district could reimagine an across-the-board class-size reduction as a targeted **class and group size** strategy aimed at boosting early literacy. Instead of reducing average class size by three students in all elementary schools, the district team could cap K-2 classes in the lowest-performing schools at 15 students and invest in lowering group sizes during ELA instruction. They could further mitigate this cost by marginally increasing class sizes (by one or two students) in other grades and/or schools.
- Strategic **schedule design** would include significant time for deep, curriculum-focused collaboration among educators and flexible blocks for individualized student instruction. It would also vary roles and responsibilities across **teams of educators** with varying levels of expertise, such as providing a shelter-and-develop model for first-year teachers and extended leadership roles for master teachers. These differentiated roles—which would impact **class sizes** and teaching loads—would involve different career paths embedded in the system's strategic **compensation model**.
- An out-of-the-box high school strategy that expands the definition of **where, when, and how learning happens** could create learning opportunities through specialized online courses and college-, community-, and employer-based partnerships. By reducing **class sizes** and teaching

loads for ninth-grade teachers, district teams could increase support for students, strengthen student-educator relationships, and make the teaching job more sustainable.

- **Teaming structures** break the one-teacher, one-classroom model, as educators share responsibility for larger groups of students, take on differentiated roles, and work collaboratively to meet student needs. While one teacher plans lessons and introduces new concepts in a particular subject for an entire grade, for example, the full team works within a **schedule design** that gives them the flexibility to vary their instructional approaches.
- A more dynamic **compensation model** recognizes that, like other professionals, teachers benefit from different supports and opportunities over the course of their career. For the same cost as a 5% across-the-board pay increase, a district team could both:
  - Shelter first year teachers by having them co-teach with an effective teacher for 30% of the day, and
  - Create teacher leadership pathways that extend the reach of the most effective educators and pay them 15% more while allowing them to remain in student-facing roles.

Using Out-of-the-Box Structures to Reallocate Resources

The tables below show the projected costs for an array of in-the-box and out-of-the-box strategies for strengthening the teaching job, expressed as a percentage of a district's annual operating budget. This data underscores the fact that by taking creative, out-of-the-box steps, district leaders can redesign the teaching job sustainably to create a lasting impact on both teachers' well-being and student outcomes and experiences.

Lever: Class and Group Sizes

Instead of...	
Marginally reducing class size for all teachers and students.	
Decrease class size for all teachers by three students.	+4.0%

Districts can...	
Strategically vary class and group size with a focus on top-priority needs.	
Reduce average class size from 20 to 15 students to support early literacy in grades K-1.	+1.9%
Provide three hours per week of middle school small-group instruction by adding teaching assistants to support small groups.	+0.8%
Reduce teaching loads for ninth-grade ELA and math teachers from 130 to 85.	+0.4%
Increase average electives class sizes by five students in middle school and high school to offset class size reductions in priority grades and subjects.	-2.9%

Lever: Schedule Design

Instead of...		Districts can...	
Adding time to the schedule for teacher planning and professional development.		*Restructure teacher schedules to create significantly more time for collaboration, planning, and connecting with students and families.*	
Expand weekly teacher collaboration time from 45 to 90 minutes by increasing specials/electives coverage.	+2.1%	Provide teachers with a flexible half-day per week for shared-content collaboration and individual flex time for planning or other tasks. Partner with a community organization to offer student enrichment and/or academic support during this time.	up to +1.5%
Add five planning days to the summer schedule.	+1.0%	Redistribute existing planning time during the week to create one extended collaboration block per week (e.g., move from five days of 60-minute specials to four days of 50-minute specials and one day of 100-minute specials).	0%

Lever: Where, When, and How Learning Happens

Instead of...		Districts can...	
Expanding the breadth of offerings through additional teacher-led classroom-based instruction.		*Leverage technology and partners to facilitate instruction across schools, during the school day and after hours.*	
Add three new advanced or elective courses at each high school	+0.2%	Expand early post-secondary opportunities for high school students through internships and dual-enrollment pathways.	+0.3%
		Increase access to electives and advanced coursework in high school by offering 50% of these courses through virtual platforms and enabling remote participation across schools	-0.7%

Lever: Teaming Structures and Educator Assignments

Instead of...	
Adding staff or responsibilities within existing structures and roles.	
Hire an additional instructional coach for each school.	+1.3%
Match each first-year teacher with a mentor who provides an hour of support each week after school.	+0.1%

Districts can...	
Differentiate educator roles with a focus on teaming and increasing flexibility for all team members.	
Create 50% release time for teacher leaders to provide job-embedded coaching support to colleagues and facilitate curriculum-focused collaboration.	+2.1%
Shelter first-year teachers by having them co-teach with an effective teacher for 30% of the day.	+1.0%
Hire teacher residents who benefit from expert-led pre-service clinical practice as preparation for joining the teaching force full-time.	+0.3%
Reduce instructional coach roles by 50% in favor of teacher leader roles with significant release time for instructional support.	-1.0%
Pair two teacher residents to fill vacant positions and assign them to teams with a multi-classroom leader.	-0.1%

Lever: Compensation Models

Instead of...	
Providing across-the-board pay increases regardless of role or contribution.	
Increase teacher pay by 5% across the board.	+1.9%

Districts can...	
Differentiate teacher pay and change the shape of the compensation curve to pay more earlier in a teacher's career	
Accelerate pay in the early stages of teachers' careers.	+1.0%
Create teacher leadership pathways that extend the reach of the most effective teachers and enable them to earn $10,000 more.	+0.9%
Shift from the traditional step-and-lane model to a salary band.	0%
Phase out pay for advanced degrees, and instead pay for increased roles and contribution.	-2.2%

Situating Costs Within a District's Budget

All district leaders face difficult decisions about how to direct limited resources in pursuit of excellence for all students, and both in-the-box and out-of-the-box investments can require a significant reallocation of resources. Compared to creatively redistributing resources, however, in-the-box levers—such as across-the-board class size reductions or teacher pay increases—can be far more costly, without providing long-term, sustainable change. In either case, district leaders need to assess the impact that strategies will have to their overall budget.

Obviously, 1% of one district's budget will represent a different amount of money than it does for another district's budget: In a large, high-funded district with a billion-dollar budget, 1% of annual expenditures is more than $10 million. In a smaller, lower-funded district, 1% might represent a few hundred thousand dollars. In either context, the shifts are significant, and leaders should target them to research-based strategies that are most likely to benefit students, especially those with the greatest need for support.

By embracing out-of-the-box strategies that rely on nuanced, intertwined levers of change, leaders have the potential to fundamentally improve the attractiveness and sustainability of educator roles as well as instructional quality, radically improving educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

Pursuing out-of-the-box strategies requires district teams to shift their mindsets, policies, and day-to-day practices to redefine how school should work. In most communities, these shifts will require a Do Now, Build Toward approach that prioritizes making near-term changes, reworks legacy structures, and improves student and teacher experiences. By embracing out-of-the-box strategies that rely on nuanced, intertwined levers of change, leaders have the potential to fundamentally improve the attractiveness and sustainability of educator roles as well as instructional quality, radically improving educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

Appendix: Assumptions Made for Budget Impact Estimates

We created a composite district profile based on the characteristics of 25 medium and large school districts in ERS' national comparative database.

District Assumptions	
Number of Students	78,500
Annual Operating Budget (Not Including ESSER Funds)	$997,000,000
Dollars Per Pupil	$12,700
Number of Teachers	5,300
Student-to-Teacher Ratio	14.8
Average Class Size	25
Average Teacher Compensation (Salary and Benefits)[2]	$79,000
Average Aide Compensation (Salary and Benefits)	$35,000
Teaching Periods	5
Student Periods	6
Teacher Utilization	83.3%
Hours in Student Day	6.5
Hours in Teacher Day	7
Days in School Year	180

[2] These figures do not include the cost of retirement and pension contributions. ERS excludes these costs from our comparative analyses since they can vary widely from state to state and district to district.